In search of tranquility, a solo cycler travels Nova Scotia

Becky Dalzell for The Boston Globe

A moored boat bobs in the water beyond a dock with stacks of lobster traps.

By Becky Dalzell Globe correspondent June 16, 2017

Waking just after sunrise, I slipped out of the rustic old house where I'd spent the night, rolled my bike down a dirt driveway, and pedaled east. It was a cool, bright morning on Nova Scotia's South Shore. The empty road curved idly along Dublin Bay; Queen Anne's Lace and goldenrod billowed over the guardrails. It was noiseless save the chatter of chickadees and the hum of coasting tires.

I had traveled from New York City to Nova Scotia for exactly this sort of ride, drawn by the promise of crisp air, little traffic, and coastal cycling. When I stopped at the LaHave Bakery for breakfast that day, the vignette was complete: wooden cases stocked scones and oatcakes, and coffee was served in mismatched mugs.

It was the fourth day of my nine-day, 525-mile solo bike trip of Nova Scotia last August. Starting and ending at the ferry dock in Yarmouth, I looped around the southern half of the rectangular peninsula: the South Shore, Annapolis Valley, and Acadian Shore regions. I had long had my eye on the province, so when a new fast ferry launched from Portland, Maine, in 2016, I bought myself and my Surly Cross-Check a ticket.

I also hoped that cycling around Nova Scotia would shake off reality for a time. Later that month, I would go home to Philadelphia to care for my father, who has dementia, which requires its own kind of endurance. For nine days, I wanted to reduce life's questions to when to change gears, where to find food, and how to reach my destination by sunset.

Get The Weekender in your inbox:
The Globe's top picks for what to see and do each weekend, in Boston and beyond.

The LaHave Bakery is in a former ship chandlery on the LaHave River, which runs 11 miles inland from the ocean. Since there's no bridge, I had planned to take the ferry across, saving myself 20 miles. But at breakfast that morning, I learned it was out of service.

Frustrated, I had no choice but to go up to Bridgewater and come down Route 332 on the opposite side. Having taken six previous bike tours, I have come to expect such inconveniences. Pressing through them is part of the fun: It's one of the few times in modern life where no app can help you.

The detour proved to be a bonus. Hugging the river's edge, Route 332 was head-spinningly beautiful. Rowboats bobbed in the white-capped water and colorful Adirondack chairs lazed on docks. Spires glinted above the poplars.

At the opposite ferry landing, I was back on track, heading toward Lunenburg on quiet roads recommended by Cycle Nova Scotia, a coalition of regional cycling groups and the tourism bureau. A few years ago, it released detailed bike maps that guided much of my trip. Designated scenic drives, the Lighthouse Route and Evangeline Trail, filled in the gaps.

During my first three days, the Lighthouse Route wound down remote peninsulas, where emerald marshes gave way to still inlets and wild lupine sprayed the shoreline. Signs were in English and French. Even in the height of summer, traffic was bafflingly light. Between Yarmouth and Liverpool, there are few towns to speak of, just simple white houses, stacks of lobster traps, and clapboard churches. It's easier to find fishing tackle than a sandwich.

The beautiful desolation of southwest Nova Scotia makes for great cycling, but requires advance planning. On my first night, I booked a room in Port Clyde through Airbnb, since there was no other accommodation in the area. When I told my host, Patricia, that I would be arriving by bike, she offered to make me dinner. With her husband out on a scallop boat, the two of us ate grilled salmon in the living room of her 200-year-old home, Lyle House. I wasn't the first cyclist to stay; she'd fed the others, too.

Towns got more interesting as I rolled east. I passed through Shelburne, an atmospheric former shipbuilding center, and spent a night in relaxed Lockeport, where I was pleased to find a general store and waterside beer. Traveling at 12 miles an hour, I could admire the area's rich historic architecture: pitched Gothic Revival eaves, timber Colonials, and Liverpool's refined merchant homes. In Lunenburg, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Georgian and Victorian buildings cover a hillside; as I ambled around, music from a folk festival wafted up from the harbor.

I was sorry to leave the coast, but my loop took me to the opposite side of the peninsula, by the Bay of Fundy. Cutting north, I slogged across the forested interior on Route 12, a boring and busy 35-mile stretch,

until I crested a hill and came to a clearing. Fields spread out before me, rolling down to the muddy Minas Basin and the cliffs of Cape Blomidon. It's a rugged, dramatic landscape, utterly unlike the South Shore's soft curves. Feeling the charge of discovery, I powered on to Wolfville and the majestic marshland of Grand Pré.

Although I skipped the Fundy shore — mountains stood in the way — I looked forward to the Annapolis Valley, the region's breadbasket. When I left Berwick early on my seventh morning, there was a cool breeze that felt like fall. My hosts that night, Bill and Polly, had recommended their favorite back roads, which ran below the North Mountain ridge past apple orchards and sleeping cows. But I could hardly appreciate the scenery, because the wind never let up.

For nearly 60 miles, I pedaled into 15-mile-per-hour gusts. Trees bent toward me. Carrying 30 pounds of gear, I lumbered through farmland along the Annapolis River, feeling physically beaten, and had the heretic notion that this would be more enjoyable in a car.

All of my bike trips have had moments like this, when I think of nothing but discomfort and asphalt and pressing forward. Other worries recede. Gears click. Trucks cruise by. Pebbles jangle in the spokes. It's my kind of meditation.

When I finally arrived in Granville Ferry, weak and ready for a burger, I told a fellow Airbnb guest about my day. He pointed out that I'd biked a metric century, 100 kilometers, against a headwind. That sounded impressive.

Over the next two days, I shot down St. Mary's Bay on Route 1, past Acadian flags, active wharves, French bakeries, and a smugglers' cove. Towns were quiet again. I landed back where I'd started in Yarmouth, eating a limp pile of fries near the ferry dock. Then to Portland, New York, Philadelphia.

A week later, I was home facing a different challenge with my father, one that offers no sense of achievement. There's no map you can trace with your fingers to show how far you've come. As I sat with him, I thought about the towns I'd cycled through: Tusket, Mahone Bay, New Ross, Annapolis Royal, Bear River. Their names became an incantation, a call for strength.

Becky Dalzell can be reached at becky.dalzell@gmail.com.